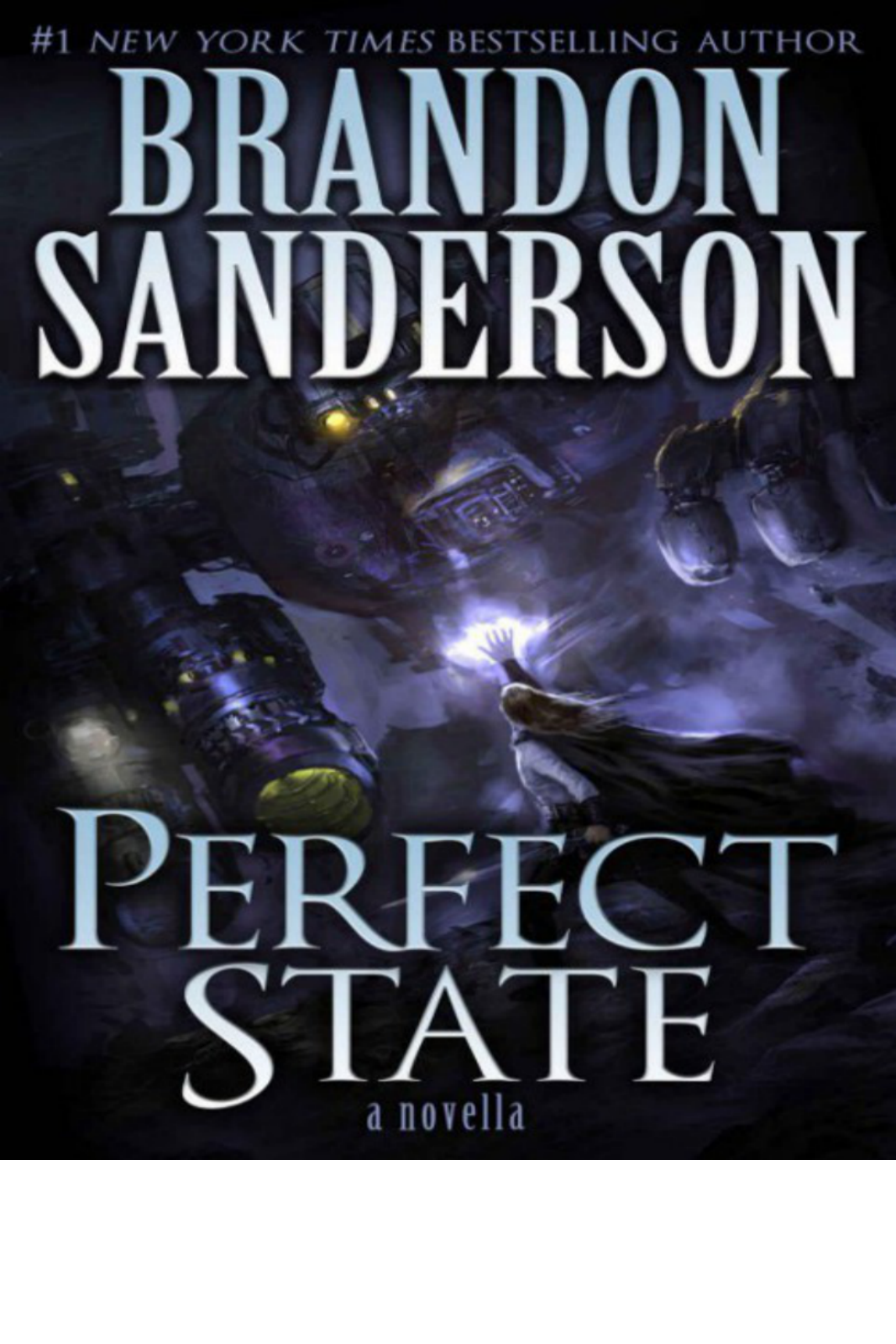


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRANDON
SANDERSON



PERFECT
STATE

a novella

PERFECT STATE

a novella

BRANDON SANDERSON



On the three-hundredth anniversary of my birth, I finally managed to conquer the world. The entire world. It had made for a rather memorable birthday present, though admittedly I'd been placed into this world with the intention and expectation that I'd someday rule it.

The next fifty years had put me at risk of boredom. After all, what did a man *possibly* do with his time after conquering the world?

In my case, I'd developed a nemesis.

"He's planning something, Shale," I said, stirring the sugar into my tea.

"Who?" Shale was the only man I knew who could lounge while wearing full plate armor. He hardly ever took the stuff off; it was part of his Concept.

"Who do you think?" I said, sipping the tea and leafing through the letters on my desk, each sealed by a daub of dark red wax. The two of us sat on a large flying stone platform with chairs and railings like a patio's. I'd Lanced us a barrier over the top to ward off the rainstorm thrumming outside. The Grand Aurora shimmered above—visible even through the stormclouds—illuminating the ground beneath us and painting it faintly blue.

The occasional crashes of lightning from the storm highlighted a hundred other platforms flying in formation around my own. They carried a small retinue of soldiers—only six thousand—as my honor guard.

Thunder shook us. Shale yawned. "You really need to figure out weather, Kai."

"I will eventually." These last fifty years spent studying the practical application of Lancing had been most productive, but controlling the weather—at least on a grand scale—eluded me.

I sipped my tea. It was growing cold, but at least that I could do something about. I undid the buttons on my right sleeve, exposing my skin to the blue-violet light pulsing from the sky. The Grand Aurora encircled the entire world, and even the mightiest storms did little more than churn its mother-of-pearl shimmering. The Aurora defeated storms; that was how I knew I'd someday be able to do it too.

I entered Lancesight, and everything around me dimmed. Everything but the Grand Aurora. I basked in its warm light, which I could suddenly feel striking my skin with a pulsing rhythm. I drew the power in through my arm, then sent the energy up out my fingers and into the cup.

The tea began to steam. I sipped it and left Lancesight as I cracked open one of the letters. The seal was imprinted with the symbol of my

spy networks.

Your Majesty, the note read. *I believe it necessary to inform you that the Wode Scroll has once again—*

I crumpled the paper.

“Uh-oh,” Shale said.

“It’s nothing,” I said, dropping the piece of paper and doing up my sleeve. It wasn’t from my spy networks at all; Besk simply knew I opened spy reports first.

The platform shook in another peal of thunder as I looked through a set of reports, each with my imperial mark at the top.

“You can’t make this thing go any faster, can you?” Shale asked.

“Be glad we don’t have to do this the old way.”

“The old way? Like . . . on a horse?” Shale scratched his chin. “I miss that.”

“Really? The sore backsides, riding through the rain, getting bitten, finding food for the beasts . . .”

“Horses have personality. This platform doesn’t.”

“You’re just saying that because it’s part of your Concept,” I said. “The dashing knight riding on horseback, winning the hands of fair maidens.”

“Sure, sure. I had quite the collection of hands. Couple of arms, the occasional foot . . .”

I smiled. Shale was now happily married with five children. The only maidens he spent any time with were the ones who called him Daddy and begged him for sweets.

I continued looking through reports. The next was the preliminary sketch for a new set of coins to be minted later in the year, bearing my image. It was mostly right, depicting my strong features and hair that curled regally to my shoulders. The beard was too big, however. I wore mine neat and squared, kept at a modest finger’s length, to present a strong image. The thing in the picture was far too bushy.

I made notes on the sketch, then continued on, ignoring the crumpled-up note I’d thrown on the floor. Besk was far too clever for his own good. I needed to fire the man and hire a *stupid* chancellor. Either that or hack Besk and rewrite his Concept.

Rewriting Concepts was a pain, though. And, truth be told, I was *terrible* at hacking, which was why—despite centuries together—I’d never gotten around to changing Besk. It wasn’t, of course, because I was fond of the chancellor. The troll-like man never did what I told him. I ruled literally billions of people, and only this one ignored my will.

“Here,” I said, holding up a report to Shale. “Look at this.”

Shale sauntered over, armor clanking. “Another robot?” He yawned.

“Melhi’s robots are dangerous.”

“Yawn.”

“You *just* yawned. You don’t need to say it.”

“Yawn. Whatever happened to the big quests, Kai? Hunting dragons, searching out magical swords? All you do these days is study magic and duel with Liveborn from other States.”

“I’m getting older, Shale,” I said, looking over the report again. My spies had overheard some of Melhi’s men in a Border State bragging about this new robot of his. I shook my head. Melhi was still smarting after what I’d done to him at Lecours, a different Border State we could both access. He’d been so certain his armies would overwhelm mine.

“Getting older?” Shale laughed. “What does that have to do with it? You’re immortal. Your body is young.”

I couldn’t explain it to him. The quests he referred to—building a kingdom, searching out hidden treasures and secrets, uniting those who would follow and conquering those who would not . . . Well, those had been what I’d needed as a youth. They’d made me into the person I was, the person who could rule an empire.

That empire pretty much ruled itself these days. We had imperial senates, diplomats, ministers. I was very careful not to step in unless something grossly stupid needed straightening. In truth, I relished nights spent in my study, experimenting, meditating. Only occasional government functions—like the one earlier today, where we’d commemorated the fiftieth year since the unification of the world—drew me out.

Well, that and the attacks by Melhi.

The churning rain outside suddenly vanished, and the heavens grew bright. The Grand Aurora was still there, but it now hovered in a sky that was blue instead of stormy grey. We’d reached Alornia. I stood up from my desk, walking to the edge of the platform, and watched the near-endless streets of the city blur beneath us.

At least here, at the center of my power, I could stop the storms. *Eventually*, I thought to myself. *Eventually I’ll be able to do it without an Aurorastone affixed to the middle of the city.*

Alornia was a place of bulbous golden domes atop finger towers. The platform slowed in its preplanned course and swung down over the city, trailed by the hundred platforms carrying my honor guard. People waited below to watch us pass; my movements were matters of national record. And so, cheers roared beneath us, as if a stream to carry us along.

I smiled. Perhaps I should get out more. At my side, Shale rested his hand on his sword, watching those below with narrowed eyes.

“Nobody’s going to be able to hit me from all the way down there,” I said, amused.

“You never know, Kai.”

The platform descended toward the palace, which sat on the hill at the center of the city, and docked at the side of my large tower, becoming a balcony again. I strode off and into my study as a group of servants in vests, loose pants, and bare chests trotted out onto the balcony and lifted my desk to carry it after us.

Shale stretched, clinking. “That trip seems to get longer every time.”

“It would probably be more comfortable without the armor.”

“I’m your bodyguard, Kai,” Shale said. “One of us has to be ready. Remember when those sky nomads tried to pinch you?” Shale smiled fondly, in the way a man might while remembering a youthful romance. “Or that time when we got trapped in the Tendrils of Sashim?”

“Sure do. You carried me . . . how far?”

“A good fifty miles,” Shale said. “Lords. That was . . . that was over a hundred years ago now, wasn’t it?”

I said nothing. Shale didn’t age—long ago, he and I had discovered a secret draught of long life in the hoard of the dragon Galbrometh. These days, I wondered if that draught had been placed there specifically for me to find, so I’d have an acceptable reason for not aging. I hadn’t known the truth of my nature until I’d reached fifty, the Wode’s Age of Awareness.

Shale stretched again. “Well, best to remain vigilant. It’s when everything is calm that you need to be most alert.”

“Most certainly. Thank you for your help today.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s a good thing I’m around, eh? Anyway, I’m going to go check in with Sindria. See what the kids are up to, you know?”

“Good idea,” I said, watching the servants carefully arrange all the items on my desk. Did I have time to file those reports . . . ?

No. I needed to get moving. I walked toward Shale, who was opening the doors that led to the hallway. He gave me a questioning look.

“If I’m quick,” I explained, “I might be able to get down into the lab before Besk can—”

Shale pulled the door all the way open. Besk stood outside.

“Ouch,” Shale said. “Sorry, Kai.”

Besk raised a single painted-on eyebrow. He was like one of those statues that people carved on the outsides of buildings. Limbs that seemed too long, robes too stiff, face expressionless. Long ago, I’d shared a drop of my draught of immortality with him. He’d haunted me ever since.

He bowed. “Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Besk,” I said. “I’m afraid the daily briefing will have to wait. I had some *very* important mental breakthroughs regarding Lancing that I

absolutely *must* record.”

Besk regarded me for a long, unblinking moment. He carried a distinctive piece of slate in his fingers. As large as a book, yet incredibly thin, there was nothing else like it in the empire. To the side, one of the servants helpfully carried in the crumpled paper I’d left on the balcony, then set it on the desk, just in case it was important.

Besk’s eyebrow rose another notch. “I will walk with you to the lab then, Your Majesty.”

Shale gave me a farewell pat on the shoulder, then clanked away. He’d faced assassins, terrors, and rebels without flinching, but even after all this time, Besk made him nervous.

“You may wish to consider giving Sir Shale a leave of retirement, Your Majesty,” Besk said as we began to walk.

“He likes what he does. And I like having him around.”

“Your will is, of course, law.”

“Yeah. Unless the Wode is involved.”

“In over a century of rule, this is the *only* time the Wode has called upon you.” Besk held up the piece of slate he carried. The Wode Scroll, the only official means of communicating with the outside.

The Scroll was filled with words, none of which I wanted to read. From the little I saw, however, the tone of the Wode’s letters was growing more forceful. I had been ignoring them too long.

We walked for a time in silence until we eventually left the corridor and stepped out onto a wall-walk between towers. I shouldn’t be so hard on Besk, I knew. He was acting according to his Concept, and was loyal in his own way, even when he was disobedient.

Below, a cheer went up, and I raised a hand absently toward my subjects. Was that a band playing? The Grand Aurora shimmered in the sky, though—for once—its light failed to comfort me.

“Is it such an onerous task, Your Majesty?” Besk asked. “The Wode requests of you only one day, to go and perform a task most people would consider pleasurable.”

“It’s not the task itself. It’s the nature of being . . . *summoned* like this. What good is it to be emperor if someone else can just call on me as if I were a common cupbearer or messenger boy? It undermines everything I’ve done, everything I’ve accomplished.”

“They merely ask you to do your duty to your species.”

“What duty has my species ever done to me?”

“My lord,” Besk said, stopping on the wall-walk. “This is most unseemly of you. I’m reminded of the child you were, not the king you have become.”

I tried to walk onward without him, but my shoes felt as if they were filled with lead. I stopped a few steps ahead of him, not looking

back.

"It is your *duty*," Besk repeated.

"I'm a brain in a jar, Besk," I said. "One of *trillions*. Why can't they bother one of the others?"

"It has been determined that you have accomplished great—"

"We've *all* accomplished great things," I said, spinning and waving my hands toward the city. "That's the point of all this. How many of those trillions of others are living lives just like mine, in Primary Fantastical States?"

"The programming allows—even requires—that each State be individually tailored."

"It *doesn't matter*, Besk," I said. Lords! I *hated* thinking about this.

The Wode had only interfered with my life twice. First at age fifty, to inform me that my reality was a layered simulation.

And now to demand that I procreate.

"It's meaningless," I said, stepping up to Besk. He wasn't of the Wode, of course; I'd never actually met any of them. He was a part of my reality, my State. But he, like everything else in the entirety of my existence, would serve the Wode if required. They controlled the programming and, if pressed, they could change anything in this world—anything but me myself—to force me to obey.

Lords, how it hurt to think about that.

"The requirements are inane," I continued. "They need my DNA to create new Liveborn humans? Well, fine. They can take it. Stick a little needle or whatever into my jar and withdraw it. Simple."

"They require you to interact with a woman, Your Majesty. The precepts say you must choose her, and she you, and then you must meet one another and perform the act."

"Our bodies are just simulations. *Why* must we meet?"

"I do not know."

"Bah!" I stalked off the wall-walk and back into the palace.

Besk followed. "I've ordered the hunting range filled with wild draklings, Your Majesty. The most vicious we could find. Perhaps destroying them will put you in a more fond mood."

"Perhaps," I said.

Even thinking about the Wode turned me into a child again; Besk was right on that count. I'd commanded armies of thousands and I'd single-handedly forged an empire that spanned continents. But this . . . this made a spoiled brat out of me. I stopped inside the stairwell.

"I do not know all the reasons for the rules, my lord," Besk said more softly, stepping up and resting a hand on my shoulder. "But they are ancient, and have served your kind well. XinWey's Doctrine states —"

“Don’t lecture me,” I said.

He fell silent, but . . . damn it . . . I could hear his voice in my head. He’d read off these rules to me often enough.

XinWey’s Doctrine states that the most essential morality of mankind is to create the greatest amount of happiness among the greatest number of people while using the least amount of resources.

Turned out, the best way to create greatly satisfied people using minimal resources was to remove their brains when they were fetuses and attach them to simulated realities tailored to fit their emerging personalities. Each Liveborn received an entire world in which they were the most important person of their time. Some became artists, others politicians, but each had a chance for supreme greatness.

All of this took only the space required for a box about the size of a melon—simulation machinery, brain, and nutrient bath all included. Incredibly efficient. And . . . to be honest, I didn’t resent it; hell, I loved it. I got to be an emperor, and while the simulation gave me opportunities, each step—each grueling quest or accomplishment—had to be my own. I’d *earned* this life.

Thinking of the millions upon millions of others who had done the same, though . . . that unnerved me. Were there millions of Besks, and millions of Shales, millions of *mes*, all living beneath a Grand Aurora?

Everything else in my existence had taught me I was unique, important, and powerful. I rebelled at the idea that I might just be another *person*.

“It will not take long, my lord,” Besk said. “Choose one of the women from the list—the Wode ranked them for you with compatibility projections—and send her a request to meet. Perhaps you could dine together.”

“A woman from their list,” I snapped. “A Liveborn woman, with her own world to rule. Lords, she’ll be insufferable.” The closest I ever wanted to get to another Liveborn was across the battlefield in a Border State, and it had taken me some time to warm even to that. My first meeting with Melhi had—

“My lord,” Besk said. “The wall.”

I started, realizing that something had changed the stone wall of the stairwell. Words were appearing in the stone, as if chiseled there, each line sinking in a trough.

CHILD EMPEROR. I HAVE CREATED A NICE SURPRISE FOR YOU.

“Melhi, you snake! How did you hack my palace? You’re violating the precepts of engagement.”

THE PRECEPTS ARE ONLY WORDS. SO ARE SCREAMS. I WILL HEAR YOURS FOR THE INSULT YOU GAVE ME.

“My spies already told me of your robot, Melhi. You should stop sending those. They never work properly in my State.” I didn’t

mention that I'd been surprised at how well they *did* work. Far better than Lancing would have worked in his State, where the laws of physics were different.

YOU WILL SCREAM, CHILD. YOU WILL SCREAM.

I entered Lancesight. Here I could see the Grand Aurora even through the stone of the palace—but I stepped backward anyway, into the doorway, where the Aurora's light could strike me directly. I drew strength into my arms from that warmth, then pushed it from me in a wave. With Lancesight, I could see the core workings of all things, the very motes of energy—or thought, or whatever they were—that made up my reality.

I could also see Melhi's hack. It manifested as tendrils of red creeping like venom into my palace. Filled with strength, I cut him off, destroying the tendrils. They hadn't been strong—he couldn't accomplish a powerful hack without running afoul of the Wode's protective programs.

The wall's surface returned to normal. I melted the stone there for good measure, recast it into a new shape, then blinked my eyes back to my ordinary vision.

"Lords, but that man needs to learn to let go of a grudge," I said. "He's never going to beat me. Surely he has to see that by now."

"Indeed," Besk said. "He does seem to boorishly continue the same stubborn course, without maturity, and without careful consideration of the best path. Wouldn't you say?"

"That's quite enough, Besk."

"I try to be topical when possible, Your Majesty."

I took a deep, calming breath. It didn't work. "Fine. Fine, whatever. Pick one of the women from the list. We'll meet, get this over with, and I'll return to my life."

"Which one do I choose?" Besk asked. "The one the Wode thinks is most compatible?"

"Lords, no," I snapped, walking away. "Pick the one on the *bottom* of the list. I might as well have an interesting time of it."

The meeting was going to happen in a Communal State. Any Liveborn could visit one of those, though I never did. Why would I want more reminders of how normal I really was?

Shale didn't like me leaving our State, of course.

"I don't understand why I can't go," he said, barring my way to the portal. "I go with you to Border States all the time."

"Those blend seamlessly with our world," I said. "They adopt our programming. This is different; it's a place only Liveborn are meant to visit. Even if we were to somehow get you there, you'd be incorporated into the local programming—you'd be given a life, memories, a backstory that fit the Communal State. It would change your personality—essentially killing you."

"I've always been prepared to give my life for you, Kai."

"Which I've always appreciated. If I were in danger, I'd accept your sacrifice. But I won't have you giving yourself up so . . . so I can go have sex."

Lords, but that sounded stupid.

"This is my fault, Kai," Shale said. "If Molly were still alive, they'd never have chosen you. The Wode only picks the unattached."

"Yes, well, she's gone."

And she had been for . . . what, ninety years now? I should have accepted the advances of one of the willing women who surrounded me. I could have had a harem—Lords, I'd *had* a harem at one point. Before Molly.

"It's got to be done, Shale," I said. "Don't make me Lance you out of the way."

He reluctantly lowered his arms. "You won't be able to Lance on the other side, Kai. You'll be powerless. Just . . . just a regular person . . ."

"Not entirely," Besk said.

I turned to find the chancellor entering the large portal chamber. He crossed the floor, which sparkled with twisting churnrock—a type of stone that changed colors with pressure. That had been a gift from the Larkians, right after their king had abdicated to me. I'd had it used in the portal room, where I rarely went. The shifting colors unsettled my stomach.

"Your Imperial Majesty," Besk said, handing me a bundle, "I have been researching in the tomes you discovered in the great hoard of the Lichfather. From what I have read of the seer's visions of other States, I believe that a few of your abilities will function once past the portal. You will pull some of the innate programming from your State with you."

“Lancing?” I asked, hopeful. “But . . . no, of course not. There won’t be anything to power it.”

“You could bring an Aurorastone,” Shale said.

“It would vanish as I passed through the portal,” I said. “Anything not part of me, or designed for the State I’m going to, won’t make the transition. But that means . . . of course. My mental boosts, they’ll work, won’t they?”

“Yes,” Besk said. “They speed up processors attached directly to your physical brain.”

“Will the Wode stop them?” I asked, thoughtful. “Clip the processors, stunt my thoughts back to a normal rate?”

“I can’t determine if they will or not,” Besk said. “I don’t think the boosts are given out in the State you are visiting, but bringing them in from the outside might be acceptable. I would limit their use, in case it alerts the Wode to what you are doing.”

“What about my healing boosts?”

“Again, I’m not certain, Your Majesty,” Besk said. “They seem more likely to work. The Communal States are designed to protect the safety of Liveborn, after all.”

I nodded, shifting to Lancesight. Looking internally, I set my mental boosts—which would make everything around me seem to slow—to automatically engage if an explosion happened near me, or if my skin were broken.

“I still don’t like this,” Shale said. “Healing boosts aren’t perfect. If someone in there manages to kill you, you’ll . . .”

I would become brain-dead. Part of XinWey’s Doctrine. A person needed to experience real danger or they would never find joy in excelling. There had to be a risk of failure, the chance to die.

Of course, I wouldn’t simply die from a random fall down the stairs. I was far too important. However, I would eventually die of very old age—I was still hundreds of years from that—and, more importantly, I could be killed, particularly if I were attacked by another Liveborn. Even a Simulated Entity like Shale or Besk could kill me if the situation were right.

Well, I’d just have to be careful. “I assume this is State-appropriate clothing?” I asked, holding up the bundle.

Besk nodded. “It will be placed upon you, pressed and neat, as you pass through the portal. There’s also a State-appropriate weapon, as requested.”

“Thanks.”

“It won’t do anything, my lord. Communal States are not intended to be dangerous, and this one is *very* well monitored. I suspect that your weapon won’t even fire unless the Wode specifically allows it.”

“I’ll feel better having it,” I said. “Never go on a date unarmed.”

Words of wisdom from my father. Well, my foster father. I was an orphan, of course. The best kings always are.

"I will remain in contact, my lord," Besk said. "Direct mental links are allowed to Liveborn visiting this Communal State."

"Excellent," I said, taking a deep breath. I tucked the bundle under my arm, then—with no other good reasons to delay—stepped into the portal.

I passed through a flash of light, then stepped out of a metal door. When I looked back, it appeared that I'd come out of a strange, tubular contraption on wheels. It was like a large number of carriages hooked together, each with its own doors and windows.

It is called a train, my lord, Besk noted to me. I've been reading about them. Quite fascinating. You might be able to replicate them with Lancing mechanics. The people would be pleased to have a faster method of travel between cities.

Have the Grand Librarian take notes of their descriptions, I sent back to him. I'll examine the idea when I return.

The sky was dark, and I found myself on a platform at the edge of a strange city. The buildings were constructed as rectangular boxes rising high into the sky, and lights twinkled in many of their windows. The sky was overcast, and the city looked very busy despite the apparently late hour.

I wore muted clothing. Trousers, black shoes that looked horribly impractical, white shirt, some kind of thin scarf tied around my neck, and a jacket. It all fit snugly and wasn't nearly as heavy as the clothing I was used to. It pulled at me in strange places, and the collar was buttoned too close to my neck for comfort.

I had an odd, wide-brimmed hat on my head in place of my crown. I took that off and tossed it away. Covering my regal hair felt like a shame. Around me, people moved out of the train I had exited. The men wore clothing similar to my own, all in the same hats with the wide brims. None of them had beards, which made me feel more distinctive.

This city is named Maltese, Besk sent. Though most people just call the State that as well, rather than using its official designation as Nightingale124. The local weapon is stored under your arm in a special hidden sheath. It's known as a handgun, and works by pointing the tube toward your enemy and pulling the trigger underneath.

Like a crossbow?

Yes, my lord. My research says they're difficult to aim properly. This State does not have symbiont aiming modifications.

Lovely, I sent, walking off the platform. Where do I go?

Straight down the street ahead. Look for a tall, blue-lit building and speak your name to the doorman. You have a reservation.

I followed the instructions, entering a wide street populated by self-driving metal carriages. I had something similar working in most of my cities, though mine were connected to Aurorastone deposits inserted into the roads.

The air smelled faintly of rain, and the ground was damp. Besk rattled off some information he'd found about Maltese in one of our tomes. This State was set perpetually at night in a highly populated city that was loosely based off what the book described as, "western cultures in early twentieth-century Earth." Whatever that was. Rain came often, but never in more than a drizzle.

I nodded, curious, listening to the sounds of the city as I walked. This State wasn't necessarily louder than my own—Alornia could be a clamorous place—but the sounds *were* different, alien. The carriages made garish honks at one another, and they growled like beasts. Perhaps they contained some kind of living animal that powered them.

A street performer I passed was playing a loud brass horn—as if sounding the call to war, though the song had a slur to it, almost as if the music itself were drunken. I was glad Simulated Entities like my subjects couldn't travel to States like this; I'd hate for the street performers back home to visit here and realize how effective a horn like that was at carrying over a crowd.

And a chatty crowd it was, all bundled up in their too-stiff clothing as they strolled the streets. I fell in behind a group of men and women as I made my way toward the restaurant, listening to them prattle about local politics.

Elections? I asked Besk.

Indeed, he said. Every two years, the local population chooses a new Liveborn to rule.

That's silly, I sent back. Many of my subject kingdoms had elections for their officials, though I—of course—could intervene and appoint someone if the masses acted foolishly. Who lets Machineborn choose what their Liveborn do? And besides, what can a king accomplish during such a short reign?

It is likely just a formal title, Your Majesty, Besk sent back. There are no Liveborn native to this State; only outside visitors like yourself are eligible to rule. One of the reasons to visit appears to be the draw of vying against other Liveborn for dominance. Though, since outside armies are forbidden, one must use local Machineborn to achieve one's goals. He hesitated. You might find it a challenge.

Hardly, I thought back with a sniff. If the title changes so frequently, there can't be any real power to it. I have no intention of getting involved. In fact, the entire nature of this State seemed to highlight that political power was just an illusion provided to engage and excite us Liveborn.

I followed Besk's directions toward a particular building, tall and rectangular. The restaurant was apparently near the top. I approached, but then pulled up short. What was that series of popping *bangs* sounding to my right?

The people ahead of me—who were likely Simulated Entities, judging by their conversation—stopped as well, but then just continued on down the street.

What are those bangs, Besk?

Handgun fire, he sent back.

I hesitated for a moment, then took off at a run toward the sounds.

No intention of getting involved, Your Majesty? Besk asked, sounding amused.

Shut up.

I prepared my mental boosts as I drew near. I didn't let them engage at the sounds; I needed to hold them in reserve, in case using them drew the Wode's attention. But I did want to be ready.

I crossed two of this State's too-smooth stone streets, then entered a smaller roadway where a group of men in hats was advancing on a young woman wearing trousers and a jacket. She fired a small handgun at her attackers desperately from within the faint cover of a recessed doorway, the door at her back apparently locked. Her only companion was another woman who lay splayed facedown on the street, golden hair fanned out around her head, blood staining the back of her dress.

Alert the Wode, I said to Besk. *Something illegal is happening here.*

I then entered Lancesight. It was like stepping into *nothingness*. Here, instead of the warmth of the Grand Aurora, I found only an empty coldness all around.

Idiot, I thought, stumbling in that darkness. What had I expected? I slipped out of Lancesight, grabbing the weapon from under my arm. The handgun felt bulky in my grip, and the hilt was shaped like a box, instead of the smooth roundness of a sword hilt. I pointed the open end of the tube toward the men and pulled the trigger. The handgun popped and *jerked* in my hand, nearly jumping clean out of it. Lords! The thing was almost impossible to control. And the noise—why would you want a weapon that drew so much attention?

Fortunately, my sudden arrival—and the cacophony of my shots as I pulled the trigger several more times—distracted the men and let the woman dash from her alcove to greater safety behind a large metal box with rubbish spilling out the top. I met her there, putting my back to the trash receptacle, feeling a thrill of excitement.

"You know this area better than I do," I told the woman. "Which way should we flee?"

She studied me. She was pretty, her face angular with dark skin.

Then she raised her weapon at me and fired.

I dodged the shot.

Well, technically I didn't dodge the shot, so much as get out of the way before it was fired in the first place. I engaged my mental boosts—slowing the world to my perception—which allowed me to judge where the woman was going to point her weapon. I didn't move any more quickly while boosted, but the advantage of watching her muscles and studying her posture let me twist to the side so that when she actually shot, the projectile missed me.

It was close nonetheless. The shot passed by my side as I fell backward to the ground, disengaging my boosts—I usually only wanted to use them for short intervals—and leveled my handgun toward the woman. From this close range, I was able to manage the weapon well enough to plant two shots in her chest, all the while thinking about how primitive it felt to be using a metal tube instead of the powers of the Grand Aurora.

One projectile left in your handgun, Your Majesty, Besk sent. He was at his happiest when he could count things for me.

Thanks, I sent back, though I didn't think I'd need the weapon. As the other men came for me, I tossed the handgun toward one of them and grabbed the end of something sticking from the top of the trash receptacle. A thin metal bar. I spun it in my hand, getting a feel for its weight, then turned toward the nearest aggressor, a man who was trying—and fumbling—to catch the weapon I'd tossed him.

I swung. The bar wasn't Indelebrean—my enchanted sword—but it had a good heft to it, and made a satisfying *whoosh* in the air as I connected with the man's hand. Bones crunched, and he dropped the handgun with a cry of pain. I stepped forward, raising the metal bar, hoping my healing boosts would be enough to handle getting hit by one of those shots from the other—

"Stop!" cried the man in front of me, falling to his knees. "Holy *hell*, are you crazy?"

The other two raised their hands, turning their weapons away from me and backing up. "Calm down, stranger," one said. "Time out, pause."

The man closest to me cursed, and I stepped back, cautiously wary.

"Raul," one of the standing men said to the one I'd hit, "this is your own fault. You got into a melee."

"Doesn't mean he can hit me with a *freaking bar*," said the man on the ground, who was cradling his broken wrist.

"Actually it does," said the other man.

I stood there, alert and confused, metal bar held in a swordsman's stance.

"Damn," the third man said, looking down at the woman I'd killed.

"He got Jasmine. What faction are you, stranger?"

". . . Faction?" I asked.

"We'll just see what registers," the second man said, checking a small device strapped to his wrist.

Nearby, the woman on the ground groaned and pushed to her feet. I gaped, then pointed my weapon at her, ready. Necromancy? Healing boosts? No . . . with surprise, I realized that my shots hadn't pierced her clothing. I glanced toward where the shot I'd dodged had hit the ground, and found that it had made a bloodred streak on the street.

Paint. The shots exploded into paint when they hit.

"What kind of trap was *that*?" the woman demanded, pointing at me. Nearby, her friend—the other woman—roused as well. "Did you think I'd believe that someone was coming to my aid last-minute, Raul?"

"It wasn't us," said the man whose wrist I'd broken. This wound, it appeared, didn't simply heal. "He's some other faction."

They all looked to me.

"I'm . . . uh . . ." I cleared my throat, standing up straighter. "I am Kairominas of Alornia, God-Emperor of—"

"Oh hell," the woman said. "A Medieval Statie."

"Yup," one of the men said, looking at the device on his arm. "The kill was registered as a wildcard."

"I see," I said. "It's a . . . game?"

They ignored me, the woman—Jasmine—flopping back on the ground, paying no attention to the paint stains on her jacket and shirt. "You mean I'm going to spend the next two weeks *invisible* to the local AIs, and nobody relevant even got points for my hit?"

"At least he didn't break your wrist," Raul complained. He'd climbed to his feet. "How am I going to get this fixed? Maltese doesn't even have bone-knitting technology."

"Who cares," Jasmine said. "Killed by a wildcard? Do you have any *idea* what that will do to my rankings?"

"You agreed to the civil war, Jasmine," one of the other men said. "It's not our fault you let us ambush you." He reached out a hand to help her to her feet. She looked at him, then turned her glare toward me. "It's *his* fault."

They all regarded me again, and I felt conspicuous there, holding my improvised weapon. I met their gazes anyway. I was an emperor.

So are they, I reminded myself. I could see it in the way they held themselves—the way Jasmine refused the hand and climbed up on her own, the way Raul had shoved down his pain and ignored his wound. He was instead calling upon someone—speaking into a device on his good wrist—to dispute my kill, claiming it should be credited to him because of his trap. Each of these people was accustomed to being the

most important one in the room.

Once they'd determined I wasn't relevant, they dispersed, speaking into wrist devices or to one another. The third man, the one who hadn't been speaking much, wandered off with the woman who had already been dead when I'd arrived.

"Fantasy Staties," he was saying to the woman. "You should have seen him, charging in here, ready to rescue Jasmine. All that was missing was armor and a horse."

"I can't understand why the Wode would do such a thing," the woman replied. "Making them grow up in such barbaric and primitive surroundings."

"It's not the Wode's fault," the man said, their voices trailing away as I was left alone on the street. "They match the State to the emerging personality of the individual. He *belongs* there."

And not here, that tone seemed to imply. I tossed the bar aside. Lords, I hated this place.

Your Majesty, Besk's voice said, sounding frustrated, in my head. *I have contacted the Wode. They seemed responsive at first, but soon sent back a note saying that you would be fine. They . . . they sounded amused, my lord.*

Great. And now I looked a fool to the Wode as well. I walked over and retrieved my handgun from the street, then fired the last projectile into the ground, noting the splat of paint it made.

Your Majesty? What happened? Besk asked. *You seem in pain, judging by the empathic link.*

I'm fine, I replied as I walked away from the scene of the game, leaving only some paint stains that still looked startlingly like blood to me. *It was a game, Besk.*

A game?

You're right; the weapons are transformed by this State's programming. They fire non-lethal projectiles; Liveborn have used that fact to make a game out of assassinating one another, or something like that.

Curious, Besk sent back. *It says in our tome that there are consequences in Maltese for firing such weapons, and I interpreted that to mean the Wode forbade it.*

No, I sent back. *The consequence seems to be that if you're 'killed,' the local Machineborn can't see you for a few weeks.*

It made sense. If the overriding politics of this State involved currying favor with a voting public, being effectively 'timed out' for a few weeks was a real consequence. It was a way to make the game more thrilling, but not dangerous. Though most of this State was a calm place for meetings, dining, and nightlife, the political subtheme allowed Liveborn to come play as well. Join one of the gangs, try to take over a portion of the city and run a criminal empire.

I might have found it entertaining in my early seventies, back when I'd been a kid. Right now, it seemed far too transparent. It didn't help my mood that I knew for certain the weapon under my arm would be useless if I encountered any real danger.

The restaurant was an upper level of one of the larger buildings at the center of town. A line of people waited to get in, though I walked past them. I wouldn't, of course, be expected to wait in a line.

It felt so odd to have nobody trailing me. No servants, no soldiers. At the front doors, a man guarding the entrance bowed, then waved me past. I caught a glimpse of a clipboard with a page full of faces on it, mine included. Several of the people from the gunfight earlier were also pictured, and I guessed this was a sheet telling him all the Liveborn visiting the city, so he'd know who to obey. Only a few of those here in the city would be Liveborn—maybe a hundred or so out of millions. Just like in other States, the rest would be Machineborn. Simulated Entities who had been born within the State, and would live their entire lives here.

The Wode could have just programmed the door guard to recognize Liveborn without needing a list, but that would have broken the illusion. Did these people know about their natures? In my State, very few were told. Age of Awareness laws didn't apply to them, and so the only place they could hear about it all was from me or the Wode Scroll.

After riding to the top floor in a glass-sided box on wires, I was led to a dining table for two set off from the others in the room. It had a dramatic view of the twilit city. So many lights; this place seemed to have an energy to it. That I liked, though it couldn't compare to the Grand Aurora.

I sat down, absently handing my jacket to a nearby servant, trusting it would make its way back to me eventually. I glanced over the menu and ordered a small set of drinks—sixteen cups, each with a sip's worth of wine in it—so I could decide which one I wanted to have with my meal. The servant blinked at the request; perhaps I hadn't ordered enough cups. The wine terminology was similar to my own, even if I didn't know the specific vintages.

Such interesting decorations, I sent to Besk, inspecting the small glass-covered candle that had been sitting at the center of my table. *No hearth at all. Soft music. Dim lights. It's actually quite nice.*

Do you wish for me to release the imperial drummers from service, my lord?

No, but find out what instrument produces these sounds.

A servant arrived with a platter full of wine cups. I selected one and raised it to my lips. Then froze.

A woman slid between the tables toward my position. She wore a red dress, but it was quite unlike the ones worn in my State. Form

fitting, with a slit up the side, and a modest neckline where the fabric folded a few times. She wore shoes with spike heels at the back, and had dark, shoulder-length hair.

I lowered the cup. The woman had a certain *poise* about her. Servants moved out of her way, and she walked as if she expected them to. Her steps were slow, confident, and someone even pulled a table to the side to make room for her to pass. She never looked down or broke stride. Her eyes were on me.

The cup slipped in my fingers, and the red liquid spilled onto the tabletop. I cursed, holding out my palm to draw in the Aurora's energy to . . .

Well, I *would* have destroyed the pigment in the wine, rendering it colorless, then drawn the moisture from it and split the water into its two primal gases to leave the tablecloth dry. If I'd been able to Lance.

Instead, I stared at the tablecloth, crossed my eyes to enter Lancesight, and was left in complete darkness until I hopped back to ordinary sight.

"So you're him?" the woman asked, reaching the table. She stood there for a moment. "You realize it's good manners to rise in the presence of a lady."

"It's also good manners to curtsy to the God-Emperor," I said, covering the spilled wine with my napkin.

"Oh great," she said, sitting. "You're one of *those*."

"Kairominas the First of Alornia," I said, holding out a hand to her. "Keeper of the Seventeen Lanterns, Master of Ultimate Lancing, Slayer of Galbrometh."

"Magical Kingdom State," she said, refusing the hand and sliding into her chair. "Did you ride a unicorn to get here?"

"We don't have those," I said flatly. "And you?"

"Just call me Sophie."

"From?"

"An Emerging Equality State," she said. "I led a worldwide civil rights movement, brought my people into the progressive era, then served five terms as the first female world president."

"Impressive," I said, trying to be polite.

"Actually it's not," she said, waving for a servant to fetch her some wine. "I just played the role *they* set up for me."

"I see."

We stared at each other. The wine was starting to bleed through my napkin, but Sophie didn't seem to care. She watched me.

"What?" I finally asked.

"I'm trying to figure you out," she said.

"It sounded as though you assumed you already had."

"You're arrogant," she said. "But we all are. You're an authoritarian;

you came here because you were ordered to, even though you didn't like it. You prefer to control everything around you—at your palace, I would find immaculate gardens and safe pieces of art hanging in a building designed by straightforward architects. I've seen hundreds like you. Thousands. Immensely powerful, but boring.”

You know, I thought to Besk, maybe I shouldn't have tried the bottom of the list after all. . . .

Besk somehow held himself back from making a comment about that.

“So,” I said, controlling my voice with some effort, “if you have all of these *presumptions* about me, why are you here? I can assume from the tone in your voice that you do not respect authority. Odd, for the president of an entire world.”

“I abandoned that,” she said, waving an idle hand.

“You . . . *what?*”

“I gave up the presidency,” she said. “Walked right out in the middle of a world senate meeting. It caused quite the stir in the ant-hive of programmed minds. I snuck off to a High-Science State, learned some technology that wasn't *technically* forbidden in my own State, then came back and armed a rebel faction with advanced weaponry. That destroyed world peace and started a global war that's still going.”

I gaped.

She shrugged as a servant came with wine, pouring her a cup.

“That . . . that's *horrible*,” I said. “How many lives have been lost?”

“What? *You* haven't started any wars?” she asked, sounding amused. “Mr. Emperor? I suppose the programming just rolled over and gave you the throne?”

“War was necessary,” I said. “For unification. My State consisted of *forty* different kingdoms when I was younger, all crammed into one continent. Bloodshed was constant. Only unification stopped that.”

“Sure,” she said, gulping down some wine. She didn't seem to care what vintage it was. “Have you discovered the lost continent yet?”

“There's no such thing.”

“Of course there is,” she said. “There's always a lost continent. The programming will pop it out once you start finding your life stale. It'll give you a new challenge, make you really work again. Should keep you engaged for a century or two until you get old enough that even the Wode's technology can't keep your brain going. Then they'll let you have peace for a few more years before you die.” She smiled at me, smug. “I've read about Fantasy States. The lost continent is usually one of only a handful of places, hidden from your magic.”

Make a note of all this, Besk, I thought, but outwardly just smiled. “We'll deal with it if it happens. I'm more curious about you and your

war. Yes, I've done terrible things, but at least there was a point to my brutality. You sound like you started a war just to ruin people's lives."

"Ruin people's lives? I doubt the Wode pays that much attention to what I do."

"I didn't mean the lives of the Wode," I said. "I meant the people killed in your State. In the war."

She waved her fingers. "Those? Just bits in a machine."

"Just bits in a . . ." I cocked my head. "I think that's the most primitive thing I've ever heard anyone say, and I've fought barbarians."

She shrugged, drinking the rest of her wine.

"You really don't accept the Machineborn as true people?"

"Of course I don't," she said. "Everything they 'feel' is just a fabrication."

"What we feel is a fabrication too."

"We have a body. Well, a bit of one remaining."

"What's so special about a body?" I demanded. Besk and Shale . . . they were my friends. I felt a need to defend them, and their kind. My subjects were more than mere bits in a machine. "Yes, we have brains, you and I. What we 'feel' and 'think' is the result of chemicals swimming around inside our heads. How is that so different from the emotions of the Machineborn? Bits or hormones, does it matter?"

She looked at me with a flat stare. "Of course it matters. This whole world, every one of these worlds . . . they're fake."

"So is the 'real world.' When people on the outside touch an object, they 'feel' the electromagnetic push of electrons in the substance shoving back on the electrons in their fingers. When they 'see,' it's really just the photons striking their eyes. It's all energy, programmed on a very small scale."

"That's deep science for a Fantasy Statie."

"Fantastical doesn't necessarily mean primitive," I said. "I'm pretty sure I've read that the Wode recognizes the rights of Machineborn. Don't they leave a State running even if the Liveborn in it dies?"

"Yeah," she said. "But they eventually nudge the State back toward chaos, then inject a newborn real person to grow up and rule it again. That's beside the point. What have you accomplished in your life? Really accomplished?"

"I unified—"

"Something that they couldn't have just programmed into the State from the start," she said. "Something real."

"I already said I don't agree with your definition of *real*."

"But you agree that they could have started your State with everyone in harmony, right? With a world government in place?"

"I suppose."

“They feel like they need to give us things to do, to entertain us. Distract us. That’s all our lives are, complex entertainment simulations. They made me be born into a State plagued by an outdated social system from Earth’s past, just so I could transform it—covering ground the real world covered centuries ago. Pointless.”

I folded my arms on the table, looking out the window.

“What?” she asked.

“I hate losing arguments,” I said. “But you’re right. That part . . . that part bothers me.”

“Huh,” she said. “Didn’t expect you to admit it.”

“It’s not the simulation itself that is the problem,” I said.

“Machineborn are people, and what they feel—what I feel—is real. What I hate is the way the Wode undermines our authority. I think I’d be all right with it all if I didn’t have this itching worry that they’re making things *just* hard enough to be exciting, but not hard enough for us to lose. At least we can still die.”

“Ha,” she said, waving a hand. “That’s a myth.”

“What? Of course it’s not.”

“Oh, it is. I promise you. No Liveborn die of anything other than old age—at least, not until they reach their later centuries of life and the Wode starts allowing them to interfere with one another’s States. We can kill each other, but our simulations . . . no, those never hurt us. I’ve seen States where the Liveborn are horribly incompetent, and they still accomplished all the minimum things they were supposed to.”

I didn’t reply.

“You don’t believe me,” she said. “I can provide—”

“I believe you,” I said. “I already knew.”

And I had. Oh, I hadn’t wanted to voice it, or even think it, but I’d suspected this was the case. Ever since my first trip into a Border State, when I’d started worrying.

It was the true reason why I avoided other States, and other Liveborn. Everything we did was like those people playing with paint guns on the streets. Our lives were games.

My secret worry wasn’t just that I might be normal, but that I might also be coddled. Like a baby in a crib.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s better when we can just pretend, isn’t it?”

“Better is an ambiguous term,” I said, looking out the window again. The rain had returned. “I still think there can be a point to our lives. In the progress we make, in who we are.”

“Oh, I’m not saying there’s no point,” she said. “I just don’t think we should let it be the one *they* give us on a silver platter. Like this meeting. I ignored all the other Liveborn who asked to meet with me.”

“Why come now?”

“Because you’re the first one to ask me from the *bottom* of the compatibility lists. I was curious.” She regarded me, blinking long lashes. Curious, she said? Then why had she chosen a beautiful dress and makeup?

Lords, I thought, looking at her. *Lords, I actually find her interesting.* How unexpected. I reached for a new cup. On the table—carved as if into the tablecloth itself—I found that words had appeared near my spilled wine.

I AM COMING, CHILD. YOU WILL SCREAM. IT IS FOR YOUR OWN GOOD I MUST DO THIS.

Damn it, Melhi, I thought. *Not now.* I didn’t even want to guess how he’d hacked a Communal State.

“Let’s leave,” I said, standing, moving my napkin over Melhi’s message.

“Leave?”

“Food doesn’t interest me.”

She shrugged, standing. “We’re both just brains floating in a nutrient solution; the food is a comfort. It helps us pretend.”

We ditched the table, passing a confused servant wheeling a cart full of food toward us. I walked back to the foyer with the box that had lifted me here. I didn’t get in it, however, instead pushing open a door that was labeled *stairs*.

Sophie followed me in. “What a wonderful change of décor,” she said, regarding the cold stone stairwell.

I began climbing the steps. “These shoes people wear here are ridiculous. What is wrong with good boots?”

“Other than being unsightly?”

“Says the woman wearing heels as long as a handspan.”

“*These* are considered very fashionable,” she said. “And it enrages my inner feminist to no end to wear them alongside a dress like this.” She was grinning widely.

“You are an unusual woman.”

“It does strange things to you to realize that the conservative establishment is *forcing* you to be a progressive liberal fighter for universal rights.” She started climbing up the steps beside me. “I had to buck that, but didn’t know what to become instead. The only thing I could come up with—something truly difficult—was to become a complete anarchist. They built a perfect world for me, so I had to burn it down.”

“Destruction isn’t difficult.”

She grinned savagely. “It is if you’re fighting against what the Wode wants. That’s the only way to be a real warrior, the only way to find a *true* challenge. Defying them.”

I grunted, agreeing with that.

“So anyway,” she said. “What was that writing on the tablecloth all about?”

“You saw that, did you?”

“Of course I did. Thought you were hiding a vial of poison at first. But it was just words.”

“It was a message,” I said as we reached the next floor. “From my nemesis.”

“Nemesis?” she said, amused. “What is this, middle school?”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“A place for children.”

I said nothing, leaning against the stairwell railing for a moment.

“Seriously,” Sophie said. “How does one go about getting a *nemesis*? Undeclared dragon back home or something?”

“It’s another Liveborn.”

“Oh, of course. You realize that you’re just playing into what the Wode wants, right? Dueling with other Liveborn to keep you both distracted.”

“Maybe,” I admitted. “It seemed that way at first, only . . . I don’t think Melhi is acting like they anticipated.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a long story.”

“And we appear to have a lot of steps left if you intend to get to the top.”

I sighed, then started up the next flight. “I first met Melhi in a Border State . . .”

I first met Melhi in a Border State, though I can't even be sure it was him I talked to.

I rode into the State with a full legion, some fifty thousand strong. Border States were new to me back then, and I hadn't wanted to take any chances.

I made the trip on a small hovering platform, only about five paces wide. The platform had a raised front and side, like a large chariot—but without the wheels or horse. There was just enough room for Shale and Besk to accompany me.

My advance guard had already secured a position on the edge of the large valley that made up the bulk of the Border State. I turned as we arrived, looking back down the wide path through the forest. We'd set foot upon that road in the jungles of Evasti in my State. After about half an hour of traveling on the enchanted road, the trees had started to change to these pines and aspens. Eventually, the road spat us out here.

"So we've left our world," I said, wearing my shining gold breastplate and helm. "Why can I still see the Aurora?"

I'd watched it through the clouds the entire duration of our trip, anticipating with dread the moment when it would fade away. It hadn't. Yes, it looked strangely distant here—shimmering in its majestic way over the tops of those mountains beyond the trees. But I could see it, and Lancesight determined I could still feel its pulses, though they were softer here.

"This is fascinating, Your Majesty," Besk said. He had a large tome open in front of him, pages pinned down to prevent fluttering in the wind of our flight. "This State is not a full world. It is just this valley, which is surrounded by a forest. At the edges of that forest, the State simply . . . fades away. If anyone travels in that direction, they will be lost in fog and then appear on the opposite side of the valley!"

Shale grunted. "Then the only exits are . . ."

"Yes, the path we took," Besk said, then pointed. "And an additional two like it, leading to the States of other Liveborn. One cannot traverse the enchanted pathways in or out without the aid of a Liveborn, and only Simulated Entities live naturally in this State. It exists solely for us to visit."

"Or to conquer," I said, and mentally instructed my platform to rise upward.

It ascended dramatically, zipping into the sky high above my army, though two dozen like it—manned by my best archers—followed to provide protection. From beneath, each flying chariot looked alike;

armies trying to bring me down would be confused at which one held me.

From this vantage, I could see the fog that Besk had mentioned, consuming the wood behind us before stretching to the mountains, which appeared to simply be scenery. I wondered if one could reach them while in flight.

Despite ending in those woods, there was territory in this State, quite a bit of it. I could barely make out the edge of the fog ring on the other side of the forest. If necessary, I could array an army in here and hold the position, blocking the other two exits with my forces. We could undoubtedly use the State's nature to our advantage; if I needed to get troops to the other side of a battlefield in a hurry, I could send them backward through the fog.

It actually seemed too perfect. That I should discover places like this now, once the entire world was mine, itched at me. Like a pain in my spine that could not be banished. I had thought I was done, but if there were many such Border States, then I had a great deal more to conquer.

I swooped the platform back down toward the front of my army. The natives of this Border State were equipped with primitive weapons—spears and wooden shields. They had dark violet skin. I glanced at Besk.

"Our early scouts indicate that the skin tone comes from eating great quantities of a spice produced by local trees," Besk said. "The spice makes these people superior warriors, able to fight tirelessly for many hours and recover from otherwise deadly wounds. In addition, they appear to have access to a strange metal mined from somewhere in this valley that they will not speak of. Those spears will slice through steel as if it were butter, Your Majesty."

"They'd make excellent subjects, Kai," Shale said, looking over the arrayed natives, who had hunkered down in a battle formation—looking completely dwarfed by my own army, and in awe of my flying platforms. "Your generals have been complaining about needing more elites. And that metal . . ." I could sense the hunger in his voice. "We can't rely on enchanted swords forever, as you yourself have said. Recharging the Aurorastone is a complete waste of your time."

"There are non-martial applications of at least gaining favorable trade with this valley, Your Majesty," Besk said. "I believe your scientists are quite excited by the discovery of that spice. The healing capacity it affords could save thousands of lives."

"Yeah," Shale said, "if you want to turn every kid with a broken leg into a supersoldier." He rubbed his chin. "Actually, that might not be a bad—"

"The spice requires many applications before those abilities

manifest, Shale,” Besk said.

“So you’re saying I’m going to have to break a lot of legs, eh?”

I mostly ignored their banter, though I was pleased to see it. Shale had been timid around Besk lately. Instead, I turned my attention to the leaders of the natives, three women holding spears, their faces painted white and red. I entered Lancesight and drew on the Aurora. The energy was sluggish, the waves of heat less warm than normal, but my magic still worked. I set a small invisible bubble around our chariot as we swung down to hover before the leaders. It would reflect all attacks, and would alter sounds passing through it so that . . .

“Greetings,” said one of the women. I understood the words in my own tongue, the Lanced shield acting as a translator.

“You will address him as Your Majesty,” Shale said.

“He is not our lord,” the woman said. “His show of force is grand, yes, but if he thinks to seize this valley by strength of arm, he will see just how weak his reach can be.”

“Surely,” Besk said, “you can see the advantages of an alliance with us! Your warriors, though proud, cannot help but look in awe upon our flying machines. Rest assured that Emperor Kairominas could conquer you if he wished. But why force his hand? Certainly we can come to an accommodation.”

As they spoke, I realized I knew what the leaders were going to say. Not because I could read their minds, but because something about this situation seemed obvious. The hidden valley, with roads to different States, whispered the purpose of this place to me.

“You should know that—” the chief began.

“Where is he?”

“Who?”

“The other Liveborn,” I said. “You were going to tell us you have met another like me. Is he still here?”

Shale and Besk looked at me as if I were mad, but the native woman was not surprised by my request.

“The Wode,” I said to my companions. “They let us discover this place. They created it to border multiple States and contain a precious resource we would all desire. Victory here will not come from persuading these people, but from defeating the other Liveborn.” I looked to the woman. “That’s what you were going to propose, wasn’t it? You’ve seen our glories, and you know you cannot avoid being conquered. All you can do is decide *which* Liveborn to serve.”

“We will choose,” the woman said, sounding dissatisfied. “Prove yourself against the others and gain our allegiance. We will call you our king then, outsider, and not before.”

It was her Concept, obviously. The hardy yet pragmatic chief. She had seen the truth of these invasions. Undoubtedly, if I won her

loyalty, she would prove a lasting and powerful ally. In order to accomplish that, I would have to do something I'd never done before. Defeat another Liveborn.

I found myself thrilled by the notion. At this point, my realm had known peace for twenty years. I was hungry for something new, a challenge my State couldn't present.

Another Liveborn. Another emperor, like myself. This would be a foe unlike any I had ever crossed.

"I repeat my question," I told the woman. "Is he still here?"

"Yes."

I grew excited. "Where?"

"In our village. You will have to come in our company if you wish to meet the emissary."

"That's not—" Shale began.

"We'll do it," I said, already climbing down from the chariot.

Shale was not pleased—and neither was Besk, whom I required to stay behind with the armies to take command if something went wrong. I was not worried. So long as I had the Aurora at my back, I was worth an army unto myself.

The chief, who said her name was Let-mere, led us past a wooden palisade into a village of huts and stone hovels. The people there had skin a much fainter shade of violet; presumably the spice of warriors was mostly reserved for the upper class. I knew without asking that they'd spent generations fighting against other tribes in this State, mastering the arts of war, believing their valley was the sum of all existence.

I joined the honor guard of natives and walked directly into their village, where the creature I would come to know as Melhi waited.

I stopped at the top of the stairwell.

“And?” Sophie asked, climbing the last few steps behind me.

We’d reached a door I hoped led to the rooftop, but it was locked by a chain. I entered Lancesight and drew upon the Aurora to—

No I didn’t. Damn it. Two centuries of having the power of creation at my fingertips was going to be difficult to reprogram.

“Here,” Sophie said, pulling something from her handbag as I left Lancesight. A very small handgun. “Plug your ears, emperor man.”

“That won’t do anything,” I said, but plugged my ears, remembering how loud the weapons had been earlier in the night. “Handguns are rewritten to fire only paint—”

A near-deafening blast from the handgun interrupted me. Since I hadn’t taken direct command of them this time, my mental boosts kicked in at the sudden explosion. I got to watch in slowed speed as the chain shattered. Sophie’s handgun was definitely *not* shooting out balls of paint.

“Those things aren’t supposed to work here,” I said, uncovering my ears as she put the handgun away.

“I’m good at doing things I’m not supposed to,” she said, then kicked the door open.

There’s no way she kicked that so solidly with those heels, I thought to Besk. *She’s got a hack; either she has a force multiplier on her legs, or those shoes are an illusion.*

No reply.

Besk?

The mental link was silent. When was the last time I’d heard him?

That seemed ominous. Should I run?

Don’t be foolish, I thought to myself. I’d survived for centuries without Besk looking over my shoulder. That said, I *was* a little more wary as I stepped onto the rooftop.

It was raining, but just a fine mist. “So,” Sophie said, walking across the roof. “Where you come from, is climbing steps considered a romantic date?”

“The roof is someplace we’re not supposed to be,” I said, joining her at the side of the rooftop, where a ledge prevented us from accidentally falling off. “I figured you’d like that.”

“We can’t go places we’re not supposed to be,” she said. “Each State, every digital inch of them, was made for us.” She hesitated. “But I doubt the Wode expected this of us, so I’m satisfied. Even if that hike up here was annoying.”

“You’re not winded,” I said. “You have physical boosts.”

She just smiled.

I took a deep breath of the wet air. How long had it been since I'd been outside in the rain? I always had force bubbles around me to protect from the weather.

"Maybe they shouldn't tell us," I said. "About our realities being simulations."

"Don't be dense. Ignorance wouldn't be better."

"I don't know . . ."

"You should be angry about the lies, the falsehoods."

"Why?" I asked. "They tell us the truth when we come of age, and everything they do is to make our lives better."

"We're like rats in cages," she snapped, leaning down on the rail and looking out over the dark city, full of twinkling lights in the misting rain. "It's a beautiful cage, but *still a cage*."

"Perhaps," I said, leaning down beside her. "But I can't find it in me to be angry at the Wode. Without this system, you and I probably wouldn't exist. Earth couldn't possibly support such a high population otherwise. We live good lives. Every man is a hero, every woman a leader. It just . . ."

"Feels washed out?" she asked. "Like we've been living in a movie?"

I didn't know what a movie was, but I nodded anyway. "Surely some of it has to be real though, Sophie. My achievements, my learning. Even within the false framework, I've accomplished things, saved lives."

"Fake lives."

"People. I protected them. Heroism is real."

"Heroism? You can't die, emperor man. What is there to be heroic about? They throw some little paper figures into the water, and you dive after them, proud that you've rescued a few when the Wode could make a billion more *literally* with the snap of their fingers—or even resurrect the ones that died. As for your 'accomplishments,' I assume they've dangled something in front of you, a special skill only you can learn and progress at?"

"We call it Lancing," I admitted. "You'd call it magic. I've been searching for its deepest secrets."

"For me, the carrot was the nature of the States themselves," she said, heedless of how the rain was ruining her makeup and hair. "I wanted to know the truth of reality. That drove me to study, to learn. The more I did, the more I realized how deep their illusion went. They used even that against me, giving me more information bit by bit. To keep me interested, curious. They try so *hard* to make our lives seem meaningful."

"Difficult to blame them for something like that."

"It's not like their lives are enviable either," she said. "The Wode.

They're just caretakers. They eat bland soup every day and sit at terminals." She tapped the railing. "I said that you should be angry. So should I. But to be honest, it's hard for me to get mad at anything these days."

"And that's why . . ."

"Why I just do whatever I want," she said. "I invent conflicts, spark wars. Latch on to anything that makes me feel. I had high hopes for hating you tonight, since the compatibility projections said we'd never get along."

"Were they right?"

"No, unfortunately."

"Unfortunately?"

"Like I said, conflict is fun."

"I can punch you, if you'd prefer."

We stood in silence, and I realized something. There was a good reason I hadn't gone out in the rain recently. It was cold, and it was uncomfortable. I'd left my jacket and hat behind. Perhaps they would have helped.

"This is stupid," I said. "I need to get this over with and go back to my people."

"Ah yes. So typical."

"Which means . . . ?"

"You fit the archetype," Sophie said. "Here we've been having a deep conversation about the meaningless nature of our lives—yet you *still* want to rush back and be king."

"I am what I am."

"Which is what they've made you. You have your own Concept, as sure as any Simulated Entity. "

"I'm real," I snapped. "And I'm not going to simply abandon my kingdom because I'm having an existential crisis."

"I suppose that is noble," she said. "Manufactured nobility, brand name with a little copyright symbol in the corner, but still a cousin to the real thing." She reached up behind her with both hands and undid the zipper on her dress.

"I . . . What are you doing?"

"This is what we're here for, isn't it?" she asked, pulling her arm out of one of the dress's shoulder straps. "So the Wode will damn well leave us alone? Propagate the species, so the wheel can go around and around."

"Here, in the rain?"

"Sure. It doesn't have to be pretty; it just has to happen. We have sex in this little digital box, and the Wode will harvest our genes and splice together a new child. I'll let you pick the kid's initial trope. I'd probably end up choosing something downright horrible for them, just

to be interesting.”

The dress came down around her bust, and she wore nothing underneath. She caught a glimpse of my surprised face as she reached back to pull the zipper down farther; it was stuck in the middle of her back. “What? Is female nudity new to you?”

“New? I had a harem at one point, Sophie.”

“How unexpected,” she said. “Men.” Her cheeks grew flush, though. “Misogynistic, horrible, brutish.”

“You’re thinking about how your youthful feminist self would react to you sleeping with a man who kept a harem.”

“Of course I am,” she said. “So long as I’m horrified by what I’m doing, I must be on the right track. Can you help me with this damn zipper? The rain . . .”

I walked over to help. I felt hot, despite the rain. I brushed my hand on her bare shoulder as I took the zipper. My heat and hers, mingling.

Lords, I realized. I haven’t wanted a woman this badly in years. Decades.

“I wish we could do something about this rain,” she said. “It is going to get distracting.”

“Back in my State, I’m very close to being able to control the weather. I’ll be all-powerful, once I’ve figured that out.”

“They’ll find something else for you to hunt,” she said. “They always do. It—”

The entire city shook.

I froze, the zipper worked most of the way down Sophie’s back. The city thumped again. The rain started falling more strongly for a moment, in a sudden unnatural way, as if someone had turned a shower on. It left the two of us soaked.

A third thump came, softer than the others. “That’s not natural,” Sophie said, turning, half naked, water streaming down her body. “What . . .”

Something loomed out beyond the darkened city skyline. Eyes burned red in a head as tall as the buildings. It lumbered through the darkness, blockish, skin reflecting the occasional ripple of lightning in the clouds above.

I groaned. “You remember I mentioned my nemesis?”

“Yeah. You still owe me half a story about that, I believe.”

“Well, he’s been promising me a new robot,” I said, hurrying along the rooftop toward the place closest to the machine. It was still distant, but pushed its way between buildings, walking directly toward us. Each step thumped.

“Wow,” Sophie said, joining me, holding her dress from completely falling off. “I don’t think people are supposed to be able to invade Communal States.” She was still mostly nude. I found the sight of her

wet in the rain, and the death machine in the other direction, strangely appealing in a similar sort of way.

I feel young again, I realized. *Like before the unification.*

“Well?” she asked.

“I . . .”

“Breasts later, giant robot now. This nemesis of yours, he’s good at hacking?”

I forced myself to look up at her face. “Too good.”

“Yeah,” she said, pulling up her dress, now soaked through. “If he can hack a Communal State . . . Well, we’ve got two choices. We can either dodge him long enough for the Wode to come down on him for flagrant violation of borders, or we can just make our way to a different Communal State and get to business there. I’m inclined toward the latter.”

“No,” I said, listening to the thumps. Screaming had begun on the streets. “People are dying. I’m not going to leave that thing here and count on the Wode to stop it.”

“Really. You’re going to take on *that*? How?”

“I’ll find a way,” I said, striding toward the steps.

“You fantasy men are such boy scouts,” she said, trailing after me. “Wait, let me get this damn dress on. Being Liveborn won’t keep me from being arrested for indecency in this State.”

I waited by the stairs, shifting from one foot to the other as she pulled the dress the rest of the way up. Getting down from this building was going to be slow. “I should have seen this coming,” I said as she entered the stairwell. “I lost contact with my chancellor earlier. I’ll bet Melhi cut him off somehow.”

We started down the stairwell. I didn’t trust that box that was suspended from wires, not with Melhi hacking the State.

“Cut off your mental links, eh,” she said. “Dangerous. That should have warned you.”

“I was distracted.”

“So let’s go back to your State,” she said. “I could probably stomach the singing trees and the elves long enough to get laid.”

“I’m *not* leaving,” I said, still running down the steps. “He’ll tear the city apart to find me.”

“Why? What on earth did you do to him?”

I looked back at her. “I’m not sure.”

“What?”

“Come on. I’ll explain what I know as we walk down the steps. Remember how I’d visited that Border State? Well, I went into the village to meet him. . . .”

I went into the village to meet him, and a steel man walked from one of the huts.

I'd created golems from the bones of the dead before, animating them with power from the Aurora. Metal, however, had proven useless as a material for me. So I was very interested as this being strode out into the sunlight. The natives leveled spears at it nervously. Chief Let-mere had warned me that the first time this creature had come to the valley, it had killed dozens of people from another village before retreating.

It had no eyes or mouth, just a flat burnished face of bronze, almost like a mask. The rest of it was human shaped, but made of pure silvery steel.

It turned an eyeless gaze upon me. "Ah," it said. The voice was a metallic buzz, distinctly inhuman. "You are the one I am to fight for this place, then?"

"Who are you?" I asked, motioning for Shale to stand down. The bodyguard had drawn his weapon and stepped forward. "You are a being of metal?"

"I am Liveborn like you," Melhi said, looking me up and down. "This is merely one of the forms I use. You are from a Fantasy State? Do they really expect this to be a challenge? My robotic legions would barely require a few hours to annihilate the—"

I turned and started walking away.

I can't say for certain what made me do it, but more and more, I think it was the sheer *convenience* of it all. A perfect location for a war, where my State wouldn't be in danger? A place with ideal tactical positions spelled out for me? Resources to help whoever managed to seize the State first, but three—instead of two—Liveborn involved, to encourage alliances?

The fakeness of it all was like a slap to my face. There we were—two absolute lords of entire worlds—and we'd been maneuvered to stand facing one another so we could mouth off? Like warriors boasting of past accomplishments to impress a tavern wench?

In that brief moment, my excitement for sparring another of my kind vanished, though it would return as Melhi later made attempts to invade my State. We'd go on to battle in other Border States, and I must admit I found those contests interesting.

But that day, I finally saw how things really were. This was an arena, and we were a pair of dogs thrown in to see which would blood the other first. I wanted nothing to do with it.

So I walked away.

“What is this?” Chief Let-mere asked me as I passed.

“You’ll have to make an alliance with the metal being, chief,” I said, waving my hand. “I’m not interested.”

“But—”

“Afraid, little emperor?” the metal being called after me.

“Yes,” I said, turning back, though it wasn’t him I was afraid of. It was the frailty of my ego, perhaps. I could pretend, I *had* to pretend, so long as I was in my own State. Traveling to another, particularly one as contrived as this . . . no, that I could not do. Not yet.

“It’s yours,” I said. “Unless the third Liveborn has already been alerted. You can fight them. Dance for the Wode. Be their little puppet. Not me.”

“I’m no puppet!” the robotic shell shouted. “Hear me, fantasy man? I am *no puppet!*”

“I’m pretty sure,” I said, puffing as I descended to the next landing, “that he was offended I wouldn’t fight him. I let him have the Border State, and he just pillaged it—stole their resources, murdered most of the people there. I had to reopen my side and send aid to recover the remaining natives.

“About ten years later, he attacked another Border State near me, and that time my conscience wouldn’t let me ignore him. We’ve been sparring off and on ever since. Twenty years now, thirty since our first meeting. Lately he’s even started to invade my State, though his robots never work properly there.”

“Huh,” Sophie said. We were nearly to the bottom of the stairs. “You realize that fighting him *here* is madness.”

I said nothing.

“His robots *will* work in this State,” she said, voice echoing in the stairwell. “Maltese has wristwatch phones and things that the real world didn’t have during the equivalent era. Those science fiction seeds will be something your friend can expand upon, fool the program into letting his machines function. I’d bet anything that that machine will be dangerous, *truly* dangerous. The Wode’s fail-safes won’t apply to it.”

I nodded, reaching the third floor. Only a little ways to go.

“So tell me *why* we’re still planning to fight?” Sophie demanded from just behind. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Look,” I said, spinning on her. “I’m doing this because I have to know, all right? If what we’ve been talking about is true, and if everything before now has been done with a safety net set up . . . then I don’t know, *can’t* know, who I am. Facing another Liveborn here is a way that I can.”

She paused in the stairwell, water pooling on the step at her feet. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“I sure as hell am. Wait here. I’ll lead him someplace less populated.”

“Wait here?” she asked, following me as I turned back down the steps. “Wait *here*? I’m not one of your soft-headed fantasy maidens with the chain mail undies, Mr. Emperor. I’ve ruled a world too, I’ll have you know, and I didn’t need absolute dictatorial power to do it. I
—”

“Fine. Can you fight?”

“Not well.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“Hack.”

That would be useful. “What can you do?”

“I can make guns work here. Obviously.”

“We need something more,” I said. “Can you make my magic function?”

“That’s a big-time hack, kiddo,” she said. “This is a *very* non-magical State. Like I said, even the robot is far more natural than magic would be.”

“Yes, but can you do it?”

“I can try, I suppose. Let’s get to where the robot first entered the State.”

“Why does that matter?”

“It shouldn’t,” she said, rounding a banister behind me, our shoes snapping on the uncovered stone. “Technically, this is all code, and there’s no such thing as proximity. But the nature of the system is such that if we’re close to the entry point, we’re ‘close’ to where your friend broke through the State’s defenses. The fabric will be weak there, and odds are that he didn’t cover his tracks very well. Sloppy coding will make it easier for me to piggyback a few other hacks.”

“Okay.”

“I might as well be speaking to a caveman, eh?”

“Fantastical does *not* mean primitive.”

“Uh-huh. And have you ever actually *seen* a computer?”

I could imagine them. Glowing light, energy—like lightning—flashing as it gave power to the machine.

“I’ll keep this simple,” she said. “If I can get your magic to work, it will have to happen where the robot broke in. Then you can summon your talking horse or whatever and fly over to blast that overcompensatory machine with your magical rainbows.”

We finally reached the ground floor, and I pushed out onto the rain-slicked street. Sophie followed. I started jogging toward the robot, but she dashed to the side, heading to one of the self-driving vehicles. There were a lot of them parked and unoccupied there.

Feeling foolish, I dashed back after her. We got in, and she made the thing growl. It trembled like an animal coming awake.

“So it is alive,” I said.

“Sure, just keep thinking that, kiddo,” she said, shaking some of the rain from her hair. She made the vehicle move. Quickly.

I yelled and hung on to whatever handholds I could. We tore down the street, far faster than a horse could have galloped. But we also had—in my opinion—far less control. “Things in these States are so uncivilized!”

“Uncivilized?” she shouted.

“The handgun that destroyed the chain, now this. There’s no elegance, just brute force. Watch out for those people! Lords!”

She pushed us around a corner at a ridiculous speed. A good horse would never have let us get this far out of control, and my flying chariots were wonderfully precise. We skirted to the side of the robot, which was crunching its way through the city, still moving toward the building where we'd been dining. It didn't see us passing.

He can't track me directly, I thought. Something must have tipped him off to where I was.

Well, with the dinner reservation—and my face on the approved list to get in—I probably hadn't been difficult to track. I pulled the handgun from its pocket inside my coat. "Can you make this work?"

"I don't know that I want to be anywhere near you firing one of those," she said.

"I'm not going to point it at your head, Sophie," I said dryly. "Make it work."

She reached over, touching it with her finger. I had a chance to regret distracting her as we almost plowed through a group of people fleeing the robot, but she turned the vehicle just in time.

"Done," she said, removing her finger. "It is reloaded and fires real bullets now. A simple hack."

"Yeah, well, someone noticed anyway," I said.

The robot had turned its massive, red-eyed head our direction. This was by far the largest one Melhi had ever sent after me.

"Damn," she said. "Your friend is probably monitoring this State for irregularities. Anything I do will alert him."

I pushed my hand against the glass window on my side of the metal carriage. "Can I . . ."

"Lever on the door," she said. "Turn it."

The glass moved down as I turned the lever. Ingenious. I leaned out and pointed the handgun toward the robot, then took three shots in quick succession, my mental boosts kicking in on the first, slowing time for me.

Sure enough, the creature started to trudge after us, its eyes tracking our movements. Firing my weapon let it locate me; the weapons weren't supposed to fire real bullets in this State, so shooting made a mark on the State's fabric.

"What was that for?" Sophie demanded.

"I want it following us."

"What the hell for?"

"Because if it's coming back this way, it's moving through the region it already passed, doing less damage," I said. "Besides, I'll need it close if I'm going to defeat it."

I fired a few more times, making certain the robot was going to keep following. Indeed, it picked up its pace. I gulped, ducking back into the vehicle. "I can't believe I'm going to say this . . . but do these

vehicles go any faster?"

They did, apparently. Sophie grinned. I held on for dear life.

"There," Sophie said.

Ahead of us—hanging about ten feet above the road and surrounded by city debris—was a shimmering to the air, a mother-of-pearl incandescence that obviously didn't fit. It reminded me of the Grand Aurora, though it was shaped like a very large version of the portal I'd come through to get here.

Sophie stopped the vehicle. Or, well, she stopped driving it—but the vehicle didn't totally stop. It slid across the ground sideways and slammed into a building. The jerking halt almost made me throw up.

"You are insane," I said.

"I thought we'd established that," she replied, crawling woozily from the metal carriage, but still grinning.

I followed her out on shaking feet. The robot was approaching faster than I'd anticipated, and unfortunately this area wasn't evacuating as quickly as I'd hoped. There were families here, cowering in the wreckage of buildings, despite the rain and the dangers. A weeping girl, no more than four, asked her mother again and again why the ground was shaking.

They have to live in a world that knows only darkness, I thought. *So that Liveborn can have a place to come play.*

I stumbled away from them, following Sophie toward the rift.

"Give me your hand," she said as we reached the shimmering.

I gave it to her, and she held on tightly as she went down on one knee, eyes closed.

I felt a tingling.

"I can't change your code directly," she said. "I don't dare."

"I have code?"

"Worried? I thought you felt Simulated Entities were equal to Liveborn."

"I didn't say that. I said Machineborn were people, and that killing them was wrong. Liveborn are *absolutely* more important."

"Nice you have your own place in things straight."

"Well, I *am* a God-Emperor. Why did you say I have code?"

"Relax. We all have code notations around our core selves; like footnotes added to a textbook by someone studying for exams."

"What's a textbook?" I said. Then, after a moment, "What's an exam?"

"Don't distract me. Hmm . . . yes. I can't rewrite your magic without risking frying your mind entirely."

"Don't change the magic. Just make it work here."

"I'm not sure that's possible; I'd have to change the laws of the entire State. But maybe . . ."

“What?”

The machine’s steps rattled my teeth; I could make out its head over the top of a nearby building, those red eyes glowing in the rain.

“Well,” Sophie said, “all of the code notations that explain how you make your magic work are still there, attached to you. It’s all tied to your State. There’s some kind of intrinsic power source, I assume?”

“Yes,” I said. “You can’t change the magic . . . but can you rewrite the source of its power? Make something in this world capable of fueling my Lancing?”

“Hmm . . . clever. Yes, maybe. Give me a moment.”

The wind started to pick up, the rain turning from a mist to a light shower. My shirt was already plastered to my body, my hair and beard sodden.

The thing emerged upon us, rounding the building nearby, shaving stone from its side.

“Just a moment . . .” Sophie repeated.

“We’re running out of moments, Sophie!”

“Working . . . working quickly as I can . . .” she said. “Oh, this is going to be a patchwork job. Electricity. Maybe I can use electricity as a substitute for your aurora thing. . . .”

“Sophie!” I said. The machine stepped onto our abandoned vehicle with one large foot, crushing it. The rain grew stronger, pelting us.

“There!” Sophie said.

The tingling washed through me, colder than the rain. It left me awake, excited, *changed*. It had worked. I could *feel* that it had worked.

Sophie groaned, and her hand slipped from mine. She slumped toward the ground, but I grabbed her and heaved her onto my shoulder, then ran down the street through the increasingly terrible rain, trying to get some distance between us and the robot.

“Unhand me,” Sophie muttered, dazed. “I’m not some damsel from your barbarian lands. . . .”

I reached a sheltered alleyway out of the robot’s sight, and set her down inside. She was limp, her eyes drooping. “I’m not . . .” she said. “I don’t need to be saved, I . . .”

“Think of it this way,” I said. “Your inner feminist must be going *insane* at the idea of being rescued.”

“You’re not rescuing me. I rescued you . . . with the magic . . . and . . .” She took a deep breath. “I’ll wait here.”

“Wise choice,” I said, glancing back out toward the street. I could hear the robot’s crunching steps, feel it rattling the windows nearby. I took a deep breath, then strode out onto the street again.

The robot had stooped down and was picking up a vehicle in one enormous hand. It looked back toward me, its red eyes blazing in the

rainy night, then hefted the vehicle as if to throw it.

I smiled, heart racing like it hadn't in centuries, and entered Lancesight.

Energy hung *all around* me. The ground was alive with it; it pulsed in buildings and from lights. I drew it in, which caused an odd crackling sound. Flooded with strength, I rewove the air to lift me into the sky and form a barrier to protect me.

Nothing happened.

"Aw, hell," Sophie said from behind.

The robot threw the vehicle—I could see everything outlined in power within Lancesight—and I cursed, throwing myself to the side. I rolled on the wet ground as the vehicle smashed to the street nearby, skidding on the stones.

That left me alive, but dazed on the ground. I shook my head, still in Lancesight, and glanced toward Sophie in the alleyway nearby. She crouched there, one hand on the wall, and to my eyes she was a blazing source of energy.

Wait, that wasn't right. Why was she glowing?

"The hack slipped, emperor man!" she shouted over the sound of the pelting rain. "I accidentally rewired you to draw upon heat rather than electricity."

Lords! I shook my head and found my feet. Ahead, the robot approached me, not far away now. I could hear the rain smacking against its metal. I drew in more energy, and I could see that Sophie was right. In Lancesight, I could sense the individual atoms in everything around me. As I drew in strength, they slowed, then stilled. Taking a step caused ice to crack at my foot.

The hack hadn't worked, and not just in the way she indicated. Every time I tried to use the energy, nothing happened. I could draw it in, but then it just evaporated from me—not even heating the air—and vanished.

The fabric of the State rebelled against me using these powers. That meant no rewriting the air to protect me. No creating lightning to strike down the robot. No magic at all.

The robot was close now, looming overhead, a cold—almost invisible—form to my eyes. As it stepped, it casually slammed a hand to the side, smashing a wall and the people hiding inside.

"It didn't work!" Sophie called. "We need to go, *now*."

People. I could see them easily now, even hidden in rooms, as they were pockets of severe heat in this frigid, rain-slicked land. People huddled on the street. The woman with her daughter had run from the robot, but had fallen to the ground nearby. The child was tugging on her mother's arm, screaming in terror.

Real people, with emotions, families, loves. And now me. With no

safety net. I felt helpless. For the first time in decades, I felt *helpless*.

It was incredible.

I walked through the rain toward the robot.

“Kai!” Sophie screamed at me.

I raised my hands and drew in energy. It evaporated.

The rain started falling harder.

There was a wave of rain when the robot first appeared, I thought. This storm is a reaction to the hacks. Besk said that this State never has more than a drizzle.

I drew in more heat. The storm grew even worse. Lightning crackled above. Thunder boomed, louder than the robot’s footsteps. The machine was only yards away now.

The atoms in the ground beneath me stilled, and I had to rip my way out of shoes that had frozen solid. The cold didn’t affect my skin much. That was part of the magic that, apparently, stayed with me. I had an insulation against most of the effects of my Lancing.

The robot slammed its hand down to crush me.

My mental boosts kicked in. I was able to judge where the hand was going to fall, then stepped out of the way. The hand smashed ice and the stone beneath, then it swept toward me.

I let the hand seize me in a cold steel grip.

“I have you!” a voice boomed above. The same voice I’d heard in that Border State all those years ago, buzzing, metallic. “I finally have you! I can crush you with my fingers, child! You will know what it is to insult Melhi.”

The rain grew harder, and I drew in more strength.

“You can’t draw this robot’s heat away, foolish man,” Melhi said with a laugh.

Indeed, I could see its core—hidden far within layers of insulated metal, and I wasn’t able to draw that heat, despite trying. I didn’t care. I drove the storm to greater strength. Rain fell like knives, freezing before it hit me, lashing my skin.

My healing boosts kicked in, and stayed just barely ahead of the ice flaying my skin. I drew in so much that the atoms in the air itself stilled, and the gasses liquefied. The air became a strange steam, hissing as it boiled back into gas almost immediately.

“. . . part of me that rebels against . . . will go forward . . . not . . . their puppet . . .”

I couldn’t hear Melhi’s words. The storm had grown too loud, the beating of ice and rain on the robot’s body like stones on pieces of tin. Rain like an ocean wave crashing upon us. Thunder, lightning, the sky ripping, the fabric of this State crumbling.

I drew it in, feasted upon it. This was a music I’d never known. The robot squeezed, but something was wrong with the hand, and the

pressure wasn't as great as it should have been. I smiled, then reached to the hand holding me. Then I drew the heat from the robot's outer layer. The metal was an excellent conductor; I pulled the heat into me like sipping water from a straw.

For a moment, all I knew was the increasing power of the storm. Like God's own rage, screaming at me for breaking the rules of reality.

The robot began to crack. It wasn't the cold, it was the *water*. Water that seeped into joints, then froze. More water followed, which also froze, expanding. The joints strained, then splintered.

The entire robot came crumbling apart, dropping in a thunderous crash.

I hit hard. Pain shook me, and my Lancesight evaporated.

I opened my eyes to find myself lying amid the wreckage of the machine. The rain started to slow, and I let go of any energy I'd held. The landscape nearby—broken buildings, fractured street—was covered in a thick layer of ice. I breathed in gasps of too-cold air. My clothing was in tatters. The cloth had frozen to me, then shattered like glass.

I pulled myself free of the wreckage, and left a disturbing amount of skin frozen to the robot's hand. Fortunately, my healing boosts were working well enough to grow my skin back.

I turned on the broken beast, smiling broadly. I had *won*. Won where a victory hadn't been set out for me, won on a battlefield the Wode hadn't created. Here, no algorithm was pushing me along.

I felt more alive than I ever had. I'd found something real. It was like . . . like I'd just come awake for the first time.

Sophie stood at the edge of the frozen ground. Lords, she was beautiful. I'd never realized how much I'd wanted to know someone real, someone truly alive. Someone who hadn't been created just for me, someone who had a life outside of mine. It was sexy as hell.

Sophie smiled deeply at me, then took the small gun from her handbag, placed it to her head, and pulled the trigger.

My mental boosts triggered at the explosion. I could see with perfect clarity as the blood sprayed out the side of her head, ribbons of scarlet like her dress. I watched it happen in slowed time, the pieces of my new life dying as her eyes faded.

The boost ended. Sophie's corpse collapsed.

I stumbled toward her and there, written in the ice, I found words. Imprinted, as if chiseled by a workman.

I TOLD YOU MY NEW ROBOT WOULD BE WONDERFUL. I WORKED LONG TO PERFECT SOPHIE. I AM PLEASED THAT SHE CAPTURED YOUR HEART. YOUR DEBT IS PAID.

“I’m sorry, my lord,” Besk said. “But she was not real. I noticed it, but Melhi cut me from the system. That woman was just like the emissary we met in the Border State—a fabrication controlled from afar, only this time created to be indistinguishable from a human being.”

I said nothing, standing beside my window, looking out over my city. My study felt too warm. Too friendly. A lie.

“I’m having trouble getting any answers from the Wode,” Besk continued. “I . . . I don’t know how he knew which woman we would pick.”

“He didn’t,” I said. “He intercepted the information detailing the one we had picked, kept it from reaching the actual woman, and sent a replacement.”

“Ah, of course.” Besk’s voice was sterile, as always.

“Were any of them real?” I asked softly. “The people I saved? Or was everything in that State Melhi’s creation?”

“I don’t know.”

Everything I talked about with her . . . everything she said . . . it was all fake.

I knew nothing. I didn’t even know what to feel.

Besk left me in my study. He obviously had no idea what to do; he’d been hovering since my return. The warmed wine sat on the table beside my hearth, untouched.

I paced, feeling angry, betrayed, *hollow*.

Finally, I picked up the Wode Scroll and wrote out a simple request. *Who are the Liveborn in the ten jars to either side of me? I would like their names and the identifiers of their States.*

I waited. Eventually, a reply came, letters appearing on the stone face as if written in ink.

We apologize for the trauma you have been put through. Melhi will be disciplined. We do not know how she hacked that State; it should not have been possible. You are released from propagation duty, per a unanimous judgment. You may return to your rule.

I stared at the slate for a few moments, then wrote again. *What are the names and State identifiers of the Liveborn in the ten jars closest to my own? I would like to contact them.*

A long pause. Finally, the names came.

It was time to stop living my life in isolation.

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Brandon Sanderson

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PERFECT STATE

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